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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000780

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [BO](#)
SUBJECT: LOVING FOR LUKA IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES: A GLIMPSE
OF THE DICTATOR'S HOMETOWN

REF: MINSK 627

Classified By: Ambassador Karen B. Stewart for reason 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Recent travel to Lukashenko's birthplace revealed Shklov and environs to be a veritable Potemkin village. Thanks to the dictator's largesse, the town of less than 15,000 sported brightly painted houses -- at least on the main streets -- and a number of new public institutions. The vaunted "agrorodok" of Aleksandriya -- with a population of 600 -- boasts a large pool, a cluster of newly-built shops and offices, and a grand, three million dollar bridge over a 30-foot-wide section of the Dnieper (where a small ferry used to suffice). If this level of investment were consistent across the country, Belarusians would have much to be happy about -- but it is not. End summary.

When I Hear The Word "Culture" I Reach For My Paintbrush

¶2. (C) Previous Embassy efforts to visit Shklov, near where Belarusian dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko was born in 1954, were generally rebuffed by local authorities. On September 1-2, DCM and conoff took advantage of official invitations to the 14th annual "Days of Belarusian Literature" to visit. The town was clearly decked out to impress a national audience: GOB officials, performers, students, educators and others from across Belarus, as well as a handful of foreign guests, took part in the festival. Houses lining the main street were freshly painted, at least on the side visible to passersby; other outside walls remained dilapidated. New street signs were placed on buildings as well; a planning oversight -- signs were initially manufactured only in Russian, rather than in Belarusian -- was remedied by the time DCM and conoff arrived. At the same time, the ongoing level of investment clearly dwarfed that received (if any) by towns of the same size elsewhere in the country: emboffs saw a number of extensively restored or newly-built banks with cash machines on display, a just-completed district museum, and a large shiny building dedicated to the "security services".

Celebrating Belarusian Literature, In Belarusian If Possible

¶3. (C) The festival kicked off on September 2 with a small, mayonnaise-laden reception for diplomatic guests hosted by Belarusian Ambassador-at-Large Vladimir Shchastniy, who regaled his guests with stories about his work in the UN Secretariat years ago. Emboffs were joined by the Slovak

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Charge (the only NATO colleague present, currently representing the EU Presidency) and ambassadors or other senior officials from the embassies of Serbia, Ukraine,

Libya, Palestinian Authority, Cuba, Iran, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The group was then directed to lead a ceremonial parade through the main streets of Shklov (both of them), followed by an array of Belarusians including marchers in uncomfortable-looking miniskirts woven out of straw and the Disneyesque mascot of the Komsomol-successor Belarusian Youth League (a human-sized membership badge with cartoon hands). The parade ended at the town hall, where guests were invited to take their seats for the proceedings to begin.

14. (C) The opening ceremony entailed performances showcasing an idealized version of Belarusian culture. Dramatized excerpts of the development of Belarusian language and literature brought attention to the contributions of historical figures and locales, while conveniently omitting any reference to political events or Belarus' extensive Jewish heritage. Dozens of awards were distributed for every conceivable Belarusian literary effort, including prizes for textbooks, illustrations, and printing houses. Award-giving moments were interspersed with Belarusian folk and ballet dances as well as performances by Belarusian pop stars Anzhelika Agurbash (a former Eurovision star) and Irina Dorofeyeva (widely promoted by Lukashenko as the "face of Belarus", see reftel). "Honored guests" from Serbia and Russia also spoke. Awards were presented by Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandr Kosinets, Minister of Information Vladimir Rusakevich, Minister of Education Aleksandr Radkov, Minister of Culture Vladimir Matveychuk, and "parliamentarian" Nikolay Cherginets; the inability of Radkov and Cherginets to speak Belarusian incited mild grumbling from some of the audience.

Keeping Us Secure

15. (C) Obviously occupied with more important matters, the local police were polite and actually allowed emboffs to

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travel from our hotel in Mogilyov to Shklov unescorted. For all scheduled events Sergey Minin from the Shklov "Tourism Office" stayed with emboffs, and Shklov Executive Committee Chairman Valeriy Ivanov kept close tabs on emboffs as well. Both Ivanov and Minin seemed to appreciate the fact that emboffs were the only foreign attendees at a September 1 concert of Belarusian national instrumentalists. Although Lukashenko never made an appearance, the police presence was extensive; streets were closed to vehicles and pairs of uniformed policemen were stationed at every intersection. Minin, who has traveled to the U.S., was quite cordial throughout, noting chattily that Lukashenko's wife still lives in Shklov in a "normal house", with her only new luxury being a Russian sauna. He later commented -- a bit pridefully -- that "half of Shklov is in Minsk", ostensibly working for the regime at Lukashenko's behest.

If You Build It, They Will Farm

16. (C) After the performance, emboffs were escorted at their request to Aleksandriya, a village of 600 people apparently founded in the 17th century but now the site of a model agricultural development (agrogorodok) which is to be repeated around the country. Minin told emboffs -- who remain highly skeptical that such locations will attract citydwellers unaccustomed to farming -- that the salaries and quality of life in the Belarusian countryside made it easy to recruit good workers. When pressed, he conceded that the GOB spends 50,000 USD to build each worker a two-story house as an incentive; in addition to a small neighborhood with new houses and streets, Minin also showed emboffs a recently-completed sports complex with an Olympic-sized swimming pool and basketball courts, a group of newly-built buildings housing shops and local services, and a grandiose, three-million USD bridge across the Dnieper river (the bridge's opening was a major story on national television a few weeks ago). In the past, travelers had taken a small

boat between Aleksandriya and the adjacent village of Kopys, Lukashenko's actual birthplace; the bridge was the result of a direct promise by Lukashenko to relieve the villagers from the hardship of taking a ferry across ten yards of river.

Comment

17. (C) Attending the "Days of Belarusian Literature" gave embassies direct insights into Lukashenko's regard for his geographical roots (as well as an opportunity to comment on the importance of the freedom of expression in a brief interview with regional television). As economic hardships and the prospect of a long winter begin to be felt, one is forced to wonder what other Belarusians -- whose towns have not benefited from the generosity of the Presidential Administration -- think of the disproportionate riches that have been showered on Lukashenko's hometown. On the other hand, it is perhaps regrettable that Shklov is not yet so comfortable that Belarus' dictator is planning to retire to it.

Stewart